

## RABBIT EMERGENCIES

### When your rabbit needs to see the vet NOW!

Something's wrong with your rabbit. She's not her usual self and she's not eating. You're worried sick but it's nearly midnight and you don't know whether to call the vet now or wait until morning ...

#### What's different about rabbits?

Rabbits don't shout from the rooftops when they feel unwell. In fact, they can look remarkably normal 'just a bit quiet' even when at death's door. A sick wild bunny makes easy pickings for a predator, which is why rabbits seem to be programmed to conceal their illnesses. And, because they are small animals, they can become dehydrated and hypothermic very rapidly.

Prompt veterinary advice is vital if your rabbit is to have a fighting chance of surviving a serious illness. Delaying until the next day can prove fatal.

#### So, what are the dangerous signs that indicate your bunny needs to see a vet immediately?

##### **Rabbit has difficulty breathing or/and lips and tongue are blue-ish coloured**

Normal respiration rate in an adult rabbit is 30-60 per minute, increasing during periods of stress. The time to be worried is if breathing is laboured (long hard breaths rather than rapid panting) or grunting. If the lips and tongue are blue tinted, your bunny is not getting enough oxygen and needs to see a vet immediately.

##### **Severe diarrhoea**

A rabbit that has an episode of runny or soft stools but is otherwise alert and lively can see the vet tomorrow morning. Similarly, excess caecotrophs (smelly, shiny, dark droppings like little bunches of grapes) do not count as diarrhoea. The ones to worry about are bunnies who are sitting hunched in a pool of diarrhoea, either liquid/watery faeces or jelly-like material. These rabbits need veterinary help fast. Baby rabbits are especially vulnerable to developing acute diarrhoea and become fatally dehydrated very quickly. Many a baby rabbit has died of diarrhoea a few days after arriving in a new home.

##### **Uncontrollable Bleeding**

As with all animals, bleeding that isn't controlled by firm direct pressure needs prompt veterinary attention. If the rabbit has been attacked by a predator, call for veterinary advice immediately even if there are no apparent injuries or even if those you can see appear minor. There may be internal damage and/or shock developing.

##### **Fractured back and legs**

Skeletal injuries occur if rabbits are dropped or fall from a height. As well as a very real risk of internal injuries, spinal injuries cause partial or total hind limb paralysis, serious but not necessarily hopeless. Specialist treatment and advice as soon as possible after the injury helps to limit swelling in the spinal cord and some rabbits recover sufficiently to lead a pretty normal life. Broken limb bones can sometimes be fixed by lightweight casts or pins and plates.

##### **Rabbit is limp, floppy or cold**

These rabbits are very, very sick. The common end point of dehydration, shock or poisoning is a weak, floppy rabbit often with cold ears. They tend to sit hunched in a corner and 'feel funny' when you pick them up. Wrap them up warmly and take them to a vet without delay

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## **Rabbit is in pain**

Rabbits who are in pain sit hunched up with their eyes half closed, reluctant to move, grinding their teeth firmly. The most common cause is belly ache. Ring the vet for advice. Check the litter tray before picking up the phone and specifically look for small droppings, pools of diarrhoea, droppings strung together or even no droppings at all. The vet will need to know if the rabbit has been eating, drinking, peeing and pooing normally.

## **Flystrike**

Rabbits, especially older or fatter ones, must have their bottoms checked daily. Fly eggs laid on dirty bottoms or open wounds hatch into maggots which literally eat into the rabbit. The toxins produced by the maggots can and will if left untreated or if treated too late, result in death. If you can get to the vet within a few minutes, do so immediately. If you are more than about 10 minutes away, dunk the rabbit's hindquarters under a running lukewarm tap to get rid of the worst of the external maggots and then drive without delay to the vets. Even with antibiotics, Ivermectin to kill the maggots and intravenous fluids, the prognosis is fairly grim. Prevention is much better – ask your vet for advice if your rabbit is at risk.

## **Do ...**

Contact the vet immediately if your rabbit is obviously unwell. If you're unsure, telephone for advice sooner rather than later. Do always call ahead to the veterinary surgery before rushing there with a sick rabbit – especially at weekends or out of hours, staff may need to come in from home.

In preparation, do find a good vet near your home. You may have travelled to a specialist vet when your pet was neutered but if you find yourself with a desperately sick rabbit at 11pm on a Sunday night, the last thing you or the rabbit needs is a 2 hour drive up the motorway. Find a local practice you trust when you take your bunny for routine care like vaccinations and annual dental checks. Most urban practices these days have someone with an interest in rabbits, although out of hours you may not see a vet you are familiar with. Do take the rabbit to the surgery (by taxi if necessary) rather than requesting a house call. The sicker the rabbit, the more likely the vet is to need equipment and drugs that can only be provided at the surgery.

Do keep vaccinations up to date. Yearly vaccinations are needed to ensure your rabbit is best protected against the devastating diseases myxomatosis and VHD. If you live in a high risk myxomatosis area, your vet will recommend booster injections every 6 months.

**With thanks to the RWA Veterinary Advisor Owen Davies for his help in preparing this advice.**

**If you need any further advice  
or have any concerns regarding your new pet,  
please contact us via [bobtailsrescue@aol.com](mailto:bobtailsrescue@aol.com)  
or telephone 020 8393 2016.**

